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DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

CANBERRA A C T 2600

31 July 1989

Mrs Jennie Herrera
Secretary
Hobart East Timor Committee

Dear Mrs Herrera

Thank you for your letter dated 14 June addressed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade concerning East Timor. Senator Evans has asked me to reply on his behalf.

The issues related to Australia's recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor were fully outlined in Mr Duffy's letter of 25 January. There is nothing to add, therefore, on the various points you raise in that regard.

Regarding the allegations of poisoning in East Timor to which you refer, the Government has conducted extensive enquiries. These investigations have led to the conclusion that while there is no clear evidence to suggest that any large scale deaths as alleged actually occurred, there may have been a higher than normal number of infant deaths in East Timor during the wet season in 1986. However, none of our contacts has given credence to the allegations of deliberate poisoning. It is not unusual for mortality rates to increase in the province during the wet season as there is always a rise in the number of intestinal problems. Reputable contacts informed us that reports of the alleged incident in 1986 could also have their origins in a bad case of food poisoning, by no means unknown in poor, tropical areas. It appears possible also that out-of-date and substandard drugs may have been used.

The Indonesian authorities, however, do appear to be making a concerted effort to improve the health situation in the province. The Governor of East Timor, Mario Carascalao, has made it known that he took strong measures against a hospital administrator in late 1986 who used expired medicines. The Australian Embassy was informed recently that East Timor, for example, has one doctor for every 6000 people as compared with the Indonesian national average of one doctor for every 13000 people.

(George Atkin)
Acting Assistant Secretary
South East Asia Branch